

Levine, Amy-Jill and Douglas Knight. *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us.* New York: HarperOne, 2011.

## Chapter Ten

I can scarcely imagine anyone doing a better job with the biblical evidence on the knotty and hazard filled subject of human sexuality.

And they begin their discussion with this useful reminder:

People of goodwill and personal integrity, with theological concerns backed by careful biblical study, will find themselves on the opposite sides of many of the issues that fall, directly or elusively, under the rubric of the Bible and sexuality (p. 295).

They then turn to discuss Eden and

... sexuality [being a] part of God's initial blessing (p. 296-296).

Sex isn't bad, it's good. Furthermore, it's the good gift of God. So L. and K. talk about Adam and Eve and even Lilith and how Adam and Eve (not so much Lilith) were treated by commentators like the 'misogynist' Ben Sira and Ambrose and Augustine.

The Song of Solomon comes in for consideration (naturally) as well, since it is, in spite of attempts to spiritualize it, all about sex. In fact, L. and K. remind us, the Song literally 'celebrates' sex. But the issue of sex is also discoverable in Proverbs and Ruth.

But the core of the chapter is the segment titled 'Legislating Sexuality'.

The majority of sex laws focus less on the woman than on the man who has claims on her sexuality (p. 307).

And

... the prohibition against male same-sex relations should also be seen as speaking to a concern for male honor and status. For a man to be

feminized, then as now, ... was seen as a gross insult, an abomination (p. 309).

And quite importantly

In the reception history of the Genesis account, the ‘sin’ of Sodom was not initially seen as homosexuality. ... Ezekiel condemns Sodom for ‘pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but [it] did not aid the poor and needy’ (p. 310).

So not only do L. and K. tackle the Sodom story, they address the relationship of David and Jonathan (which is sometimes cited as homoerotic) and the sexually overt tale of Ehud and Eglon.

How today’s readers assess these texts will depend on numerous factors.... Those who claim the text speaks against male homosexuality should not immediately be seen as homophobic bigots; they are reading the text faithfully. And those who seek religious sanction for marriage between same-sex couples or ordination of gay men and lesbians should not be seen as dismissing the biblical text. Debates will continue (p. 313).

The discussion doesn’t conclude there however. The chapter moves on next to divorce, marriage, and adultery.

That prostitution existed is undoubted. That it was seen as improper is undoubted as well especially considering that the Prophets use prostitution as a damning metaphor for the behavior of the people of God. L. and K. don’t make that point or draw that connection however. They simply describe the actuality of the practice and its apparent acceptance in Israelite society. And that in spite of their very engaging treatment of those horrifically graphic texts in Ezekiel 16 and 23.

[T]he major concern of [biblical] authors is not prostitution, but adultery (p. 318).

Abortion too comes under the microscope in L. and K.’s introduction to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.

Like the subject of homosexuality, abortion receives far more attention by people who read the Bible than by the Bible itself (p. 320).

Noting that in Assyrian law women who attempted to abort their children were to be impaled, L. and K. point reader's attention to Ex 21:22-25. This text is itself interpreted by the Mishnah (Niddah 5:3) as follows-

... the fetus is not a 'person' until it is born (i.e., the head emerges) (p. 321).

Finally L. and K. speak briefly of sexual abuse and sexual innuendo as made use of in the Hebrew Bible. Their prime example is the story of Jael and Sisera. They also mention Judith (from the apocrypha).

They close out the section observing

The Bible's treatment of 'sexuality' broadly defined is complex, open to multiple interpretations, sometimes inconsistent, and not always definitive (p. 327).

And that, it seems is the very reason why issues like abortion and homosexuality are still debated by sincere believers (both Jews and Christians). L. and K. don't solve the problem- but they do allow the various viewpoints to gather at the same table in a civil and cordial manner. And that's excessively important.

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